

A SHOPPING TRIP WITH A SURPRISE

It was fate that brought one London couple to medieval Valbonne in Provence. Now it is happiness that is keeping them there, discovers **Cathy Hawker**



Valbonne's historic central square has lots of lively restaurants and a wonderfully French ambience

IN A business trip to Cannes in 2001 Maxine Taylor escaped from a long meeting to buy a jumper – and bought a house as well. The corporate affairs executive from Godalming, Surrey, had only planned to take a walk around the medieval square of Valbonne, 30 minutes from Cannes.

While choosing the jumper in one of the bijou shops close to the Place des Arcades she struck up a conversation with the owner.

When she emerged 20 minutes later she hadn't just bought the jumper,

she had bought a 400-year-old town house, too.

Eight years on, Maxine is even more passionate about Valbonne and her beautiful house. "It has been a big adventure mixed with serendipity," says Maxine. "It turned out that the house, which was for sale, was owned by the shopkeeper's grandmother, who had lived in it since 1944.

"I wasn't thinking of buying house but a sense of adventure just took over. It took a year to find the deeds. The notaire thought the Records Office had been bombed in the Second World War but they were eventually found on a dusty shelf in the Nice archives."

Maxine, her husband Simon and a mutual friend of theirs, who also loved the area, Tony Halmos bought the property jointly in September 2001. They paid £100,000 for their 17th century town house with no garden.

"It was described as modernised but it certainly wasn't," says Maxine. "The top floor had polystyrene ceiling tiles and the lower floors had three levels of floor tiles. When we removed them we gained 18 inches of headroom."

IN KEEPING WITH THE TOWN

The man who transformed the house was architect Bernard Fauroux. For 20 years he has worked with his wife in an office just outside the walled town, watching as the old houses were renovated, and gentrified shops

opened on the narrow pedestrianised streets. Renovations at Maxine's house cost £110,000 and took 12 months. "Everything was replaced except the walls, the main beams and the original staircase," says Fauroux.

"These houses are built directly on the stone without foundations so we had to allow for humidity. Maxine wanted to renovate but keep many traditional elements."

COLOUR IS THE KEY

The façade is coated in sand, lime and ochre colouring from Roussillon, while inside white walls mix with exposed stone and solid beams.

Fauroux also oversaw the building work and joint owner Tony Halmos, a City PR director from Kennington, credits him with making the project run smoothly. "It's a listed house in a conservation area," says Halmos. "Getting all the permissions would have been difficult for us as remote buyers. We flew down frequently but Mr Fauroux was unusually good at dealing with bureaucracy and managing the local team efficiently." On completion, they received a small grant from the mayor for renovating an historic part of the town and display his letter of thanks proudly in the house.

Maxine, Simon and Tony visit Valbonne as often as work allows, staying for anything from a long weekend to a fortnight, and try to meet up together

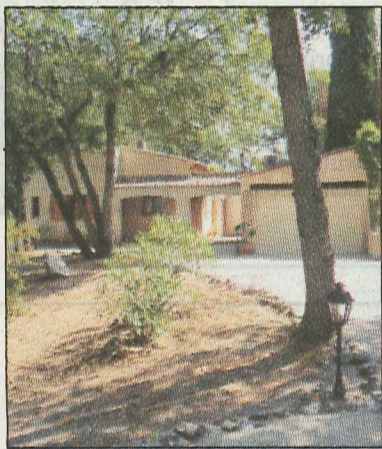
there at least once a year. Antibes, 30 minutes away, and the harbour and market in Nice are favourite day trips but with more than 12 restaurants within walking distance, they enjoy staying in Valbonne. They rent the house only to family and friends.

"When we signed the final agreement at the notaire's office we celebrated with some rosé in a favourite restaurant, Le Cadran Solaire," says Halmos. "We never wanted to be with the jet set on the coast, but for friendly town life close to countryside with gentle French ambience, Valbonne is perfect."

■ **Bernard Fauroux Architecte:** visit www.fauroux.fr; or call 00 33 (0) 493 12 06 05

'Everything was replaced except the walls, the main beams and the original staircase'

£795,200: a single-storey house in a gated estate with three bedrooms, large gardens and swimming pool. Through Winkworth France (www.winkworth.fr; 020 8576 5582)



£882,600: a renovated town house in the centre of Valbonne with four bedrooms and a ground floor that could be used for commercial space. Through Engel & Völkers (www.voelkers.com/valbonne; 00 33 (0) 492 99 1872)



VALBONNE is a Provençal market town built around the small medieval village. Cannes is 11 miles south, Antibes nine miles south-west and Sophia-Antipolis, France's Silicon Valley, is five miles away.

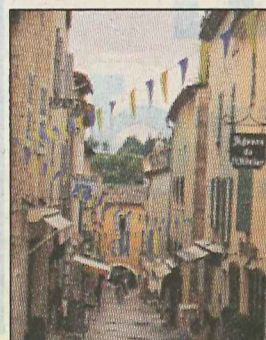
"Valbonne property is more affordable than nearby Mougins and is truly a year-round town," says David Lee of Winkworths France. "It has a real sense of community and a good Provençal lifestyle."

Bargains are hard to find in such a gilt-edged area. Town houses in the old village cost from

€600,000 (£550,300), while elsewhere in Valbonne Winkworth has villas with gardens and pools from €750,000 (£687,900). Engels & Völkers has a one-bedroom renovated top-floor flat with terrace in the village for €307,000 (£281,580) and a four-bedroom south-facing town house for €960,000 (£880,500).

CONTACTS:

■ **Winkworth France:** visit www.winkworth.fr; or call 020 8576 5582
 ■ **Engel & Völkers:** www.engelvoelkers.com; 00 33 (0) 492 99 1872



Valbonne is pure charm



Maxine Taylor (above left) looks out of her house before the renovations began. Left, after the work had been completed

